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HEADLINE: Statement on Signing the Haskell Indian Nations University and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute Administrative Systems Act of 1998

BODY:

Today I am signing into law H.R. 4259, the "Haskell Indian Nations University and Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute Administrative Systems Act of 1998." Haskell Indian Nations University (Haskell) and Southwestern Indian polytechnic Institute (SIPI) are the only Federally owned and operated schools in the United States dedicated to higher education for American Indians . Together they have provided thousands of American Indians valuable educational opportunities. This Act will broaden and increase those opportunities by assisting both institutions in their ongoing efforts to attract and retain highly qualified administrators, faculty, and staff.

The Act authorizes Haskell and SIPI each to conduct a 5-year demonstration project to test the feasibility and desirability of alternative personnel management systems designed to meet the special staffing circumstances in a college and university setting. Currently, Haskell and SIPI operate under the same civil service personnel system as most other Federal agencies. The demonstration projects authorized by H.R. 4259 will provide these schools flexibility to test personnel reforms in areas such as recruitment, hiring, compensation, training, discipline, promotion, and benefits. At the same time, the Act maintains continued adherence to applicable laws and regulations on matters such as equal employment opportunity, Indian preference, and veterans' preference. My expectation is that, at the conclusion of these demonstration projects, these schools will have tested alternative personnel systems that maintain important employee benefits and protections while promoting the flexibility necessary in a college and university setting.

In signing H.R. 4259, I recognize that the legislation raises several concerns. It allows Haskell and SIPI to conduct demonstration projects involving leave and other employee benefits, such as retirement, health benefits, and life insurance --something no other Federal agency has been permitted to do. We must be mindful that altering employees' benefits for even a brief portion of their careers can have a serious long-term effect. Should such modifications be applied to a large number of Federal employees through other demonstration projects they could have a damaging effect on the Federal retirement and insurance trust funds, which depend on spreading risk of loss over the largest possible group of individuals. These concerns are compounded by the fact that H.R. 4259 does not provide for the level of oversight by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) that is typically required for personnel-related demonstration projects.

Because of these concerns, I am directing the Secretary of the Interior and

Public Papers of the Presidents

the presidents of Haskell and SIPI to involve the OPM fully in the development and evaluation of the schools' demonstration projects. This involvement is only appropriate given the OPM's important role in managing and safeguarding Federal employee benefits programs and overseeing demonstration projects. Further, I strongly urge the Congress to await the outcome of the OPM's ongoing comprehensive review of the Government-wide benefits package for Federal employees before authorizing other demonstration projects outside the OPM's current statutory authority.

With these caveats, I trust that H.R. 4259 will prove helpful to Haskell and SIPI in attracting and retaining highly qualified employees, thereby enabling them to continue to fulfill their important mission of providing quality higher education opportunities to American Indians.

William J. Clinton

The White House, October 31, 1998.

NOTE: H.R. 4259, approved October 31, was signed Public Law No. 105-337.

NOTE: H.R. 4259, approved October 3~, was assigned Public Law No.105-337